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# Bottling Tibet. The post-colonial commodification of the Third Pole.

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## Abstract

The commodification of Tibet's glacial water in China is following a pattern first observed in America. With a growing middle class and a rise in public distrust of potableness of tap water, companies aim to increase their profits by playing into the public's suspicions, and using images of imagined purity to advertise their premium bottled water. In China, this has resulted in an increased economic interest in the glaciers across the Tibetan plateau. As one of Asia's largest watersheds, the bottling of Tibetan water is pernicious to the local environment as well as local populations, and could have detrimental effects on over a billion people who rely on rivers that spring from this region. This article takes a closer look at the implications of bottling glacial water in Tibet. It considers the geo-political history between Tibet and China, the history of "functionless" water in China, and the effects of increased industry on the delicate environment of the Tibetan plateau.

**Keywords:** water; commodification; Tibet; China

## 1. Introduction

The Tibetan plateau is home to some of the highest peaks on the globe and is often referred to as the "roof of the world". These highlands hold the largest amount of fresh water outside the north and south poles, garnering the region the title of "the third pole". Tibet is resource-rich in freshwater with glacial runoffs and mountain springs; it supplies water to 1.35 billion people (Albert, 2016). In contrast, despite holding a sixth of the world's water, mainland China continues to face growing water scarcity. Every year, industrial sites pollute 70 percent of lakes and rivers, causing freshwater sources to decline at a rapid rate (Tingting, 2019). About 90 percent of the groundwater in Chinese cities is considered polluted. As a result, large cities like Beijing and Shanghai are labelled "functionless" and "unfit for any purpose" (Tingting, 2019). This not only means that the water cannot be repurposed, but also that a range of diseases can perpetuate because of water pollution.

In addition, many people across China still lack access to potable drinking water.

While legislation to protect people from water pollution has been passed, the inaction of local governments speaks louder than the words of the law (Boren, 2017). Rather than enforcing legislation, the Chinese government moved to privatize and commercialize water supply, commodifying water instead of protecting it as a public good. This has created a large market for bottled water production and catapulted China to become the largest consumer of bottled water globally. Tibet has become a focus of this bottled water industry with the government offering tax breaks, lower extraction fees, cheap loans, and various other methods to support companies bottling Tibetan water and shipping it to the mainland (Hongqiao, 2015).

In this article, I argue that the water bottling industry in Tibet entails large risks for the local environment as well as Asia's broader water supply.

In addition, this industry and the pressure to produce clean, bottled water perpetuates and increases the violation of human rights in the region. In order to make this argument, I will first provide a brief overview of the political history between Tibet and China. I will then explain the recent obsession Chinese consumers have with bottled water and particularly their fixation on Tibetan water. Finally, I will be discussing the negative effect bottling water in Tibet has on the local environment and the implications it has for water supply across South Asia.

## 2. China and Tibet – a contested history

For approximately two millennia, Tibet was an independent sovereign nation, undergoing only brief periods of foreign influence by some of China's strongest rulers (Umass, 2019). In 1950, using military invasion, however, China forcibly and illegally occupied Tibet. In 1951, the Tibetan government signed a document called the "Seventeen Point Agreement of the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet." Signed under duress, the document forcibly agreed to China's illegal occupation of Tibet. In response to this Chinese occupation, the civilians of Tibet revolted in 1959, leading to a massacre of a suggested 87,000 Tibetan civilians and 2,000 Chinese soldiers (UCA, 2020). Since 1959, there have been similar uprisings against Chinese rule, resulting in the imprisonment and death of the civilians involved (Free Tibet, 2020).

Over the last decade, the region has seen over 150 self-immolations by local Tibetans in protest against China's illegal occupation of their home (Ross, 2019). Any opposition against China's occupation, however, is treated as a crime against state security. Those charged with such crimes face severe penalties and are refused the same legal support granted to defendants charged with other crimes in China.

A number of factors lead to the invasion of Tibet, including the country's rich mineral deposits and the Himalayan mountain range that forms a natural fortress against enemies. One of Tibet's resources that is continuously exploited, is the rich freshwater sources found across the Himalayan region (Albert, 2016; Ross, 2019). These benefits make it unlikely for China to ever willingly forego Tibet's occupation, and the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) will never be fully autonomous as

long as they are subordinate to the whims of the Chinese Communist Party.

## 3. Water scarcity in China

In contrast to Tibet's wealth of water resources, China struggles with a lack of clean water. Whereas China is home to a large fraction of the world's population, rapid industrialization, climate change, and pollution have made providing clean drinking water to the country's citizens a true challenge (Avraham, 2012; Tingting, 2017). Per year, as many as 190 million Chinese fall ill as a result of diseases caused by water pollution, and approximately 60,000 people pass away due to gastric and liver cancer (Tao & Xin, 2014). In China's rural areas, approximately 300 million people lack access to safe drinking water (Garland, 2013).

Rather than focusing on water purification and environmental regulations, the country responded to the water crisis by turning to bottled water, creating a large and exponentially growing market. While bottled water has been in the Chinese market since hina saw an increase from 19 billion to 37 billion liters sold between 2010-2015 (Daxue Consulting, 2020). In 2017, China became the largest consumer of bottled water, pulling ahead of the United States with 10.42 billion gallons of consumption (Illsey, 2017). In the last decade, they also became one of the largest manufacturers of bottled water in the world (Hongqiao, 2015).

For the Chinese consumer, however, buying bottled water is no guarantee of safety and health, as they must be wary of the brand and credibility of the water they purchase. Across the country, there are cases of "fake water" or beverages that are bottled and sold but have not undergone proper testing or treatment and can have negative impacts on one's health (Elegant, 2007). Precisely because branding and reputation have become such large factors, the market began to focus on Tibet, a land associated with religious and environmental purity (Free Tibet, 2015).<sup>1</sup> Similarly, companies like Qomolangma and Tibet 5100 have succeeded in capitalizing on Tibet's pure image, with the companies selling glacial runoff at a premium price (Hongqiao, 2015; Free Tibet, 2015).

In a country that no longer trusts its tap water, Tibet 5100 has introduced consumers to what Martha Kaplan referred to as "comforting coolers", water that people are comfortable ingesting because

it is associated with a cost (Kaplan, 2011). Bringing comfort through premium pricing and ad imagery, these brands have created specific consumer identities. By advertising to these identities, they were able to induce consumers into what Andre Szasz called “personal commodity bubbles” (Szasz, 2007). These bubbles are a way for consumers to trust the products that they are purchasing because of how much they are willing to pay for them. Chinese citizens are alarmingly aware of the environmental dangers that threaten their health but rather than tackling these large issues it is more convenient to pay the premium for alternative goods. These big-budget water bottling companies like Tibet 5100 use their brand imagery to sell safety and health at a more premium price in comparison to Qomolangma which is more affordable and advertises the same glacial water. The Tibet bottled water industry has different levels profiting off consumers who are in positions to care for their health, safety and longevity.

Chinese consumers have created what Szasz described as an “inverted quarantine”, choosing to prioritize their bodily safety while risking the negative impact of their choices on the larger environment (Szasz, 2007; Hongqiao, 2015). Through this inverted quarantine, Chinese consumers protect themselves against the negative impacts of water pollution by consuming commodified water, placing individual health above environmental impacts of mass-water production and privatization.

#### 4. Making space for water

Since 2015, Tibet has 28 bottled water companies licensed to extract across the plateau with little to no regulations placed upon them (Distasio, 2015; Hongqiao, 2015). One of these companies is Qomolangma, the Tibetan name for Everest, which is situated on a national reserve 50 miles from base camp. To accommodate this booming water industry, and under the guise of modernization and environmental protection, approximately 260,000 Tibetan nomads have been displaced since 2006 (Gyal, 2015). These nomadic pastoralists are forced to sell their livestock, relocate away from their indigenous lands and into concrete houses in an effort to “modernize” the plateau. These efforts, however, often lack the social support to thoroughly bring forth a positive generational shift towards modernity. In some cases, they create new problems.

For example, former nomads like Gere have been resettled into sparse towns and are in debt, relying on diminishing government subsidies, and finding ways to integrate traditions into their new roles (Gyal, 2015; Jacobs, 2015). This is because the Chinese government’s attempt at modernizing these populations does not take into consideration religious conventions and cultural practices.

The government proclaims that nomadic resettlement assures the protection of traditional pastoral lands, making them into natural reserves that protect against grassland degradation. However, bottled water companies like Qomolangma are given access to these same natural reserves (Gyal, 2015; Hongqiao, 2015). Companies like Tibet 5100 that bottle the glacial runoff from the Nyenchen Tanglha mountain range take water away from the streams that eventually feed the Yarlung river, which sustains life for nomads, grazing yak, and sheep. Water extraction across the plateau therefore risks the delicate balance of the highland environment while simultaneously contributing to climate change.

This booming water industry and the freedoms it has been given by the Chinese government carries significant implications, both for the Tibetan people and for the water supply across Asia. Much like the Vatukaloko people of Fiji, the Tibetan locals directly affected by these companies are not included in the decision making for water extraction (Kaplan, 2008; Free Tibet, 2015). Also just like Fiji water, these beverages are bottled in plastic which contributes to significant amounts of microplastic found in Tibetan rivers and lakes (Kaplan, 2008; Jiang et al, 2019). In addition, the bottling and mass distribution of this water is only made possible by the large trans-railway system. Built in 2006, the railway allows easy land shipments across the mainland but caused tremendous damage to permafrost (The Ice-Box, 2017). Permafrost is the perennially frozen layer of soil that hosts the carbon-based remains of organisms that froze before they had a chance to decompose (Cho, 2018; Yohe & Schimdt, 2020). Building a railway across such an environment may result in expediting the thawing process. While Tibet is thought of as the “third pole”, the approximately 600 glaciers in the region show that they are melting faster than they are reconstructing (Tibet News, 2019). This could have detrimental

effects on all of Asia as 10 major rivers that sustain life for 1.4 billion people in Asia flow from Tibet.

## 5. Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that the presence of bottled water companies in Tibet is detrimental to the local environment, the water supply across Asia, and also contributes to the negligence of human rights in the region. The lack of correspondence between government officials and local populations that are primarily affected by these decisions as well as the forced displacement of nomads from their ancestral lands are a blatant violation of human rights. To resolve the Tibetan water crisis, however, the directly affected local and nomadic tribes require agency and a platform to share their opinions on this matter. A way for this to happen would be to have a local coalition consult companies, allowing for a reconciliation or a better understanding between the parties involved. The Tibetan water crisis has negative implications on the water supply for most of Asia. The international community therefore also has a responsibility to step up and provide funding for extensive research on the impact of bottled water companies and other major industries contributing to the crisis. With more empirical and scientific evidence demonstrating the negative impacts of water extraction in Tibet, a stronger case could be made for the cessation of water privatization and mass production, or at the very least a better regulation of the industry

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